

March 31, 2022

VIA EMAIL

The Honourable Jean-Yves Duclos
Minister of Health
House of Commons
OTTAWA, ON K1A 0A6

- and -

The Honourable Carolyn Bennett
Minister of Mental Health and
Addictions and Associate Minister of Health
House of Commons
OTTAWA, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Duclos and Minister Bennett:

We are writing to encourage you to put in place concrete measures to keep health care workers across the country healthy and safe. Data released today by the Canadian Institute for Health Information shows the grave impact of COVID-19 on the health care workforce. As of January 14, 2022, 150,546 health care workers had gotten sick with COVID-19, and at least 46 had died. There was a 59% increase in the number of COVID-19 infections amongst health care workers in the seven month period between June 2021 and January 2022. As the representatives of 435,000 health care workers nationwide, we are calling on your government to take steps to address the systemic occupational health and safety gaps that put health care workers at risk. The precautionary principle must be prioritized in any federal response to public health emergencies, which calls on governments and employers to take every reasonable precaution to protect the health and safety of workers without having to wait for scientific certainty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us inadequacies in Canada's pandemic preparedness, occupational health and safety measures, and supply chain of personal protective equipment (PPE). We encourage your government to protect health care workers by reforming the National Emergency Strategic Stockpile (NESS), restructuring how the federal government provides PPE guidance and ensuring domestic production and supply of PPE.

A recent audit of the federal government's procurement of PPE during the pandemic found that the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) "was not as prepared as it could have been to respond to the surge in provincial and territorial needs for PPE and medical devices brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic". Longstanding problems had been identified with the NESS through a series of internal audits going back to 2010. Your government must prioritize the needed investments in NESS to ensure Canada is prepared for future public health emergencies and implement the recommendations from the recent audit and earlier reviews. PHAC must develop a rationale on the amount of PPE to have stockpiled based on the precautionary principle and our experiences with COVID-19. The government must develop a well-functioning electronic inventory management system for the NESS, rotate PPE stock regularly to provinces and territories to ensure non-expired PPE, develop agreements with provinces and territories on PPE management during public health emergencies, and provide a yearly report on stockpiled PPE. Health care workers should never again face garbage bags, expired masks, and locked PPE supply cupboards.

We encourage your government to make the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) responsible for occupational health and safety during public health emergencies, rather than PHAC. CCOHS already has the structure and expertise to fulfill this role, which could be similar to the role of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) in the United States. The CCOHS is governed by a tripartite council representing government, employers, and labour, and has the necessary occupational health and safety experts. PHAC did not have the appropriate structure or expertise to develop the PPE guidance that was issued during the pandemic. Unions were not incorporated as collaborating partners in the development of worker health and safety recommendations during the pandemic. This equal participation of unions and workers is called for under the Internal Responsibility System underlying all Canadian worker safety laws and regulations. Furthermore, PHAC did not follow the precautionary principle with regard to PPE guidance or have the appropriate staff expertise to be making occupational health and safety determinations.

The pandemic illustrated the problems with a reliance on global supply chains for key medical equipment and PPE during public health emergencies. To address shortages, a number of Canadian companies have begun producing PPE and a new standard and testing for Canadian respirators has been developed. The federal government needs to support and expand this capacity to ensure we are well prepared for future public health emergencies. Recent media reports state that the Canadian government continues to source the majority of its PPE from companies outside Canada. The federal government needs to change course and prioritize Canadian companies when purchasing PPE.

We encourage your government to value the important role health care workers have played throughout the pandemic by prioritizing their health and safety. Actions such as reforming the NESS, expanding the mandate of CCOHS, and ensuring domestic production and supply of PPE are immediate steps that can be taken to protect health care workers and prepare for future public health emergencies.

Sincerely,



MARK HANCOCK
National President
Canadian Union of Public Employees



SHARLEEN STEWART
International Canadian Vice-President
SEIU Canada



LARRY BROWN
President
National Union of Public and General Employees

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cc:
Seamus O'Regan Jr., Minister of Labour
Don Davies, Health Critic, NDP
Michael Barrett, Health Critic, Conservatives